

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 CIAE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07 L-03

NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 IO-13

OMB-01 SSM-03 /085 W

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R 111039Z DEC 76

FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 885

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMCONSUL LERUSALEM

AMEMBASSY JIDDA

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSL TEL AVIV

DIA WASHDC

USCINCEUR

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 8458

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, SY, PLO

SUBJECT: SYRIAN PRESSURES ON THE PALESTINIANS

1. SUMMARY: THERE ARE INDICATIONS THAT SYRIA IS USING PERIOD PRIOR TO EXPECTED RECONVENING OF PALESTINE NATIONAL COUNCIL TO EXPAND ITS INFLUENCE WITHIN PLO AND PREPARE PALESTINIANS FOR POSSIBLE MOVEMENT ON NEGOTIATING FRONT. PNC CHAIRMAN FAHUM WANTS TO EXPAND SIZE OF PNC AND DILUTE FEDAYEEN AUTHORITY BUT OTHER PROMINENT PALESTINIANS DISAGREE; LOCAL COLUMNIST HAS PROPOSED TWO-STAGE PNC MEETING TO SEPARATE DIVIDED FEDAYEEN ORGANIZATIONS FROM NON-MILITARY ELEMENTS. FAHUM HAS ALSO PROPOSED ESTABLISHMENT OF PREPARATORY COMMITTEE FOR PNC. SAIQA HAS ALREADY BEEN REORGANIZED, REPORTEDLY AT INSTIGATION OF RIF'AT AL-ASAD, WHO IS ALSO REPORTED TO BE BEHIND MASS PALESTINIAN RALLY BEING PLANNED DECEMBER 17 AT DAMASCUS YARMUK CAMP, POSSIBLY FOR PURPOSE OF CALLING PRESENT PALESTINIAN LEADERSHIP TO ACCOUNT FOR ITS MISTAKES. DEC. 12 CENTRAL COUNCIL MEETING IN DAMASCUS MAY CLARIFY WHETHER SPLITS IN PLO

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AFFECTING SAIQA AND PFLP-GC HAVE BEEN HEALED, AND UPCOMING

PROJECTED MEETINGS BETWEEN ASAD AND PALESTINIAN REPS IN CAIRO
WILL REVEAL EXTENT OF SYRO-PALESTINIAN
RECONCILIATION WHICH AT THE MOMENT REMAINS UNCONSUMMATED.
EMD SUMMARY.

2. SEVERAL INDICATIONS, INCLUDING COMMENTS BY PNC CHAIRMAN KHALID FAHUM, RIF'AT AL-ASAD'S INVOLVEMENT IN PALESTINIAN AFFAIRS, PRES. ASAD'S INTERVIEW WITH JOSEPH KRAFT, SARG MEDIA COMMENTARY AND EFFORTS TO REBUILD AND LEGITIMIZE SAIQA AS EFFECTIVE FORCE ONCE AGAIN WITHIN PLO COUNCILS, SUGGEST THAT SYRIA MAY BE TRYING TO UTILIZE PREPARATIONS FOR RECONVENING OF PALESTINE NATIONAL COUNCIL (PNC) TO DISCIPLINE PLO AND ENHANCE SYRIAN INPUT INTO FORMULATION OF PLO POLICY. MOST VOCAL PROPONENT OF NEED TO MODIFY PNC HAS BEEN PNC CHAIRMAN KHALID FAHUM. HE HAS EXPLAINED TO SOME RECENT VISITORS (DAMASCUS 8226, 8287) HIS VIEWS ON ENLARGING PNC TO ENHANCE ITS REPRESENTATIVE CHARACTER AND DILUTE STRENGTH OF FEDAYEEN ORGANIZATIONS. HE HAS ALSO EXHIBITED SOME PERSONAL ANIMOSITY TO PLO LEADER YASIR ARAFAT BY CHARGING HIM WITH "EXTREMISM" AND INTERFERENCE IN LEBANESE INTERNAL AFFAIRS; THESE ACCUSATIONS PROBABLY FIND CONSIDERABLE RECEPTIVITY ON PART OF PRES. ASAD, BUT IT QUESTIONABLE TO WHAT EXTENT FAHUM'S CHARGE THAT ARAFAT NO LONGER REPRESENTS PALESTINIAN "MAINSTREAM" REFLECTS PALESTINIAN POPULAR OPINION.

3. IT IS CLEAR THAT NOT ALL PALESTINIANS OR EVEN SYRIANS SHARE FAHUM'S SENTIMENTS. ARAFAT, FOR EXAMPLE, HAS IN PAST CALLED FAHUM "TRAITOR" TO PALESTINIAN CAUSE AND PROPOSED HIS REPLACEMENT AS PNC CHAIRMAN. SYRIAN DISSIDENT HAMOUD SHOULFI, WHO MAINTAINS EXTENSIVE PALESTINIAN CONTACTS, CLAIMS THAT FAHUM VIEWED BY MANY AS SYRIAN "STOOGES" AND HAS LITTLE PUBLIC FOLLOWING. IN SHOULFI'S VIEW, FATAH STILL VIEWED BY MANY PALESTINIANS AS SPOKESMAN FOR PALESTINIAN NATIONALISM. HE CITED OPPOSITION TO SYRIAN MILITARY INTERVENTION IN LEBANON WHICH SURFACED ON WEST BANK LAST SUMMER AS EVIDENCE OF ARAFAT'S SUPPORT AMONG PALESTINIAN MASSES. HE ALSO NOTED THAT FATAH, WHILE WEAKENED BY LEBANESE FIGHTING, HAS DEMONSTRATED ITS MILITARY CAPABILITY AND HAS PROVEN IT CAN CONTROL PLO "EXTREMISTS" IF IT

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CHOOSES TO EXERT ITS STRENGTH. HE ALSO REFERRED TO RELATIVE EASE WITH WHICH FATAH OVERRAN SAIQA POSITIONS IN JUNE AND INABILITY OF OTHER FEDAYEEN ORGANIZATIONS TO PROVIDE MUCH ASSISTANCE TO FATAH IN ITS CONFRONTATION WITH SYRIA. ACCORDING TO SHOULFI, ARAFAT DERIVES MUCH OF HIS STRENGTH LESS FROM PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES THAN FROM HIS ROLE AS SYMBOL OF PALESTINIAN HOPES FOR INDEPENDENT STATE. HE ASSERTS THAT FATAH WILL CONTINUE TO RESIST ATTEMPTS

BY SARG TO WHITTLE AWAY ITS INDEPENDENCE.

4. EVIDENCE OF SARG DETERMINATION TO DISCIPLINE RECALCITRANT ELEMENTS OF PLO IS PLAN TO HOLD PALESTINE NATIONAL RALLY DEC. 17 IN YARMUK CAMP OUTSIDE DAMASCUS. LOCAL PALESTINIAN SOURCE SHOWED EMBOFF HIS INVITATION TO ATTEND RALLY. SOURCE SAID HE HAD TALKED WITH FAHUM AND LEARNED SYRIANS MAY USE RALLY AS A SORT OF SHOW TRIAL OF PRESENT PALESTINIAN LEADERSHIP. THIS IS LIKELY SURMISE BECAUSE, ACCORDING TO SHOEFI, ENGINEER OF MEETING IS RIF'AT AL-ASAD, BROTHER OF PRESIDENT AND COMMANDER OF DEFENSE COMPANIES. RIF'AT'S DEEPENING INVOLVEMENT IN PALESTINIAN AFFAIRS (RECENT REPORT STATED HE ALSO WAS CATALYST OF SAIQA REORGANIZATION) IS SIGN OF INCREASING SARG CONCENTRATION ON "REFORMING" PALESTINIAN MOVEMENT. WE HAVE NO RECOLLECTION OF PREVIOUS INVOLVEMENT OF RIF'AT'S PART TO THIS EXTENT IN PALESTINIAN AFFAIRS.

5. ANOTHER IDEA SARG HAS PERMITTED TO SURFACE WAS SUGGESTION BY LOCAL COLUMNIST (DAMASCUS 8167) THAT PNC BE DIVIDED INTO TWO-STAGE MEETING. IN FIRST STATE, NON-FEDAYEEN GROUPS WOULD DRAW UP PLAN OF ACTION TO DEAL WITH ISSUES FACING PALESTINIAN MOVEMENT, I.E, ATTENDANCE AT GENEVA CONFERENCE AND CREATION OF PALESTINIAN STATE. PROGRAM WOULD THEN BE PRESENTED TO FEDAYEEN GROUPS FOR THEIR APPROVAL. COLUMNIST ASSERTED THAT HIS SUGGESTION AIMED AT PREVENTING DIVISIONS WITHIN COMMANDO MOVEMENT FROM BLOCKING POLITICAL PROGRESS WITHIN PALESTINIAN CAMP, BUT FATAH AND OTHER FEDAYEEN ORGANIZATIONS PRESUMABLY READ IT AS ANOTHER ATTEMPT BY SARG TO UNDERCUT THEIR AUTHORITY. PALESTINIAN SOURCE TOLD US ISSUE OF FEDAYEEN INFLUENCE ON PALESTINIAN MOVEMENT IS NOW BEING ACTIVELY DEBATED BY PALESTINIANS. OPPOSING FAHUM'S VIEW THAT FEDAYEEN

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INFLUENCE SHOULD DECLINE "SINCE MILITARY PHASE IS OVER AND POLITICAL PHASE BEGINNING," PLO SPOKESMAN ABU MAYZAR HOLDS THAT FEDAYEEN MEMBERSHIP SHOULD BE MAINTAINED TO PRESERVE REVOLUTIONARY CHARACTER OF PALESTINIAN MOVEMENT. HE ALSO ARGUES THAT WEST BANKERS AND INDEPENDENT ELEMENTS FROM JORDAN WOULD NOT BE PERMITTED TO ATTEND IN ANY CASE. UNSPOKEN ASSUMPTION MAY BE SUSPICION THAT SARG WILL PACK EXPANDED PNC WITH RELIABLE SUPPORTERS OF SYRIA.

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 CIAE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07 L-03

NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 IO-13

OMB-01 SSM-03 /085 W

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R 111039Z DEC 76

FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE 886

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMCONSUL JERUSALEM

AMEMBASSY JIDDA

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

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6. DIVISIONS IN PALESTINIAN RANKS STILL PERSIST IN WAKE OF END OF FIGHTING IN LEBANON. SAIQA RETURN TO BEIRUT AND OTHER LEBANESE CITIES HAS BEEN RESISTED BY SOME PLO GROUPS THAT RESENT ITS OBEDIENCE TO DAMASCUS AND MAY SUSPECT SYRIA HAS INFILTRATED ITS OWN MILITARY PERSONNEL INTO SAIQA ORGANIZATION. RECENT CLASH BETWEEN SAIQA AND RIVAL PLO ORGANIZATION AT BEIRUT REFUGEE CAMP ONE SYMPTOM OF TENSIONS CREATED BY EFFORT TO REINSERT SAIQA BACK INTO PLO, AND RECENT TROUBLES IN TRIPOLI ANOTHER EXAMPLE. WE ALSO UNDERSTAND ZUHAYR MUHSIN BACK IN BEIRUT WHERE HE RECEIVED BY PRES. SARKIS. RECENT SYRIAN MEDIA COVERAGE OF MUHSIN'S ACTIVITIES HAS HIGHLIGHTED HIS DUAL ROLES AS SAIQA COMMANDER AND LEADER OF PLO MILITARY BUREAU. DEC. 7 AL-BAATH REPRODUCED MUHSIN'S INTERVIEW IN BEIRUT'S MONDAY MORNING/AL-NAHAR, IN WHICH HE CLAIMED SAIQA HAD RECOVERED MOST OF ITS OFFICES WITH EXCEPTION OF TYRE BRANCH. HE ADDED THAT TALK OF PNC "PREMATURE," OBSERVING THAT PALESTINIAN UNITY DEPENDENT UPON BRINGING TO TRIAL AND PUNISHING "DEVIATING PALESTINIAN LEADERS RESPONSIBLE FOR WHAT HAPPENDED IN JORDAN AND LEBANON."

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7. FAHUM TOLD BRITISH EMBOFF THAT SPLITS WITHIN PLO MOVEMENT HAVE BEEN A PRIMARY OBSTACLE TO SYRIAN AGREEMENT ON RECONCILIATION WITH PLO. FAHUM SAID THAT TWO WEEKS AGO ARAFAT BROUGHT GROUP OF PALESTINIAN OFFICIALS TO DAMASCUS WHICH INCLUDED CAPT. AHMAD JABRIL'S RIVAL IN PFLP-GC, MAHMUD ABBAS. FAHUM CLAIMED THAT ASAD REFUSED TO ACCEPT INCLUSION OF ABBAS IN ANY MEETINGS WITH DAMASCUS LEADERSHIP UNTIL MAHSIN'S PLACE IN PLO HIERARCHY REAFFIRMED.

8. AS DEC. 12 PALESTINE CENTRAL COUNCIL MEETING APPROACHES, PRES. ASAD IS IN MIDST OF COMPLEX MANEUVERINGS WITH ARAFAT AND PLO LEADERSHIP TO DEFINE PLO'S COURSE OF ACTION AND ASSURE THAT DAMASCUS VIEWS FIND RECEPTIVITY IN COUNCILS OF PALESTINIAN LEADERSHIP. IN TERMS OF GOALS, WE NOTE SOME SUCCESS IN REACHING AGREEMENT, OFR PALESTINIANS SEEM "READY" TO ATTEND GENEVA MEPC, ACCORDING TO ABU MAYZAR (DAMASCUS 8287). PRESIDENT ASAD'S INTERVIEW WITH KRAFT (DAMASCUS A-65) ALSO CONTAINED HIS ENDORSEMENT OF A PALESTINIAN STATE, A DEPARTURE FROM HIS NORMAL DEFERENCE TO PLO REGARDING PALESTINIAN ISSUE. IF SYRIA IS ALSO WORKING TO EFFECT PALESTINIAN-JORDANIAN RAPPROCHEMENT, THERE IS AS YET LITTLE SIGN OF SUCCESS. ASAD TOLD KRAFT THAT SYRIA HAD NOT TRIED TO ARRANGE MEETINGS BETWEEN PLO REPS AND JORDANIANS. EVEN KHALID FAHUM, ACCORDING TO BRITISH EMBOFF, TURNED DOWN INVITATION TO VISIT AMMAN EXTENDED BY TALHOUNI, ALTHOUGH EMBOFF ADDED THAT FAHUM PRAISED STATUS OF PALESTINIANS LIVING IN JORDAN.

9. WHAT DAMASCUS REGIME APPARENTLY DESIRES IS CLOSE WORKING RELATIONSHIP WITH PLO, A RELATIONSHIP THAT ARAFAT AND HIS SUPPORTERS FEAR WILL TRANSFORM PLO INTO VIRTUAL SYRIAN APPENDAGE. THUS, WHILE SYRO-PALESTINIAN MILITARY CONFRONTATION IN BEBANON HAS BEEN CUT SHORT, FOR TIME BEING AT LEAST, BY ARAB SUMMITS, TENSIONS BETWEEN DAMASCUS AND PALESTINIANS ARE CONTINUING IN POLITICAL CONTEXT OF PLO RELATIONSHIP TO ARAB PEACE OFFENSIVE AIMED AT RESOLVING DISPUTE WITH ISRAEL. SYRIAN DOES NOT WISH TO SEE PALESTINIAN FACTIONALISM UNDERMINE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROGRESS TOWARD SETTLEMENT WITH ISRAEL, AND IS PREPARED TO USE ITS INFLUENCE TO ENSURE SYRO-PALESTINIAN COOPERATION ON NEGOTIATING FRONT. ACTIVITIES LEADING TO PNC, CONFIDENTIAL

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INCLUDING CENTRAL COUNCIL MEETING, POSSIBLE PALESTINIAN SUMMIT MEETINGS TALKS WHICH ASAD (OR MORE PROBABLY ASAD AND SADAT) WILL HAVE WITH PALESTINIANS DURING ASAD'S VISIT TO CAIRO DEC. 18 N AND UPCOMING DAMASCUS RALLY, WILL PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES TO MEASURE EXTENT OF SYRIAN SUCCESS.
MURPHY

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